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“The First-Born of Egypt”

“The Dance of Death”

BY

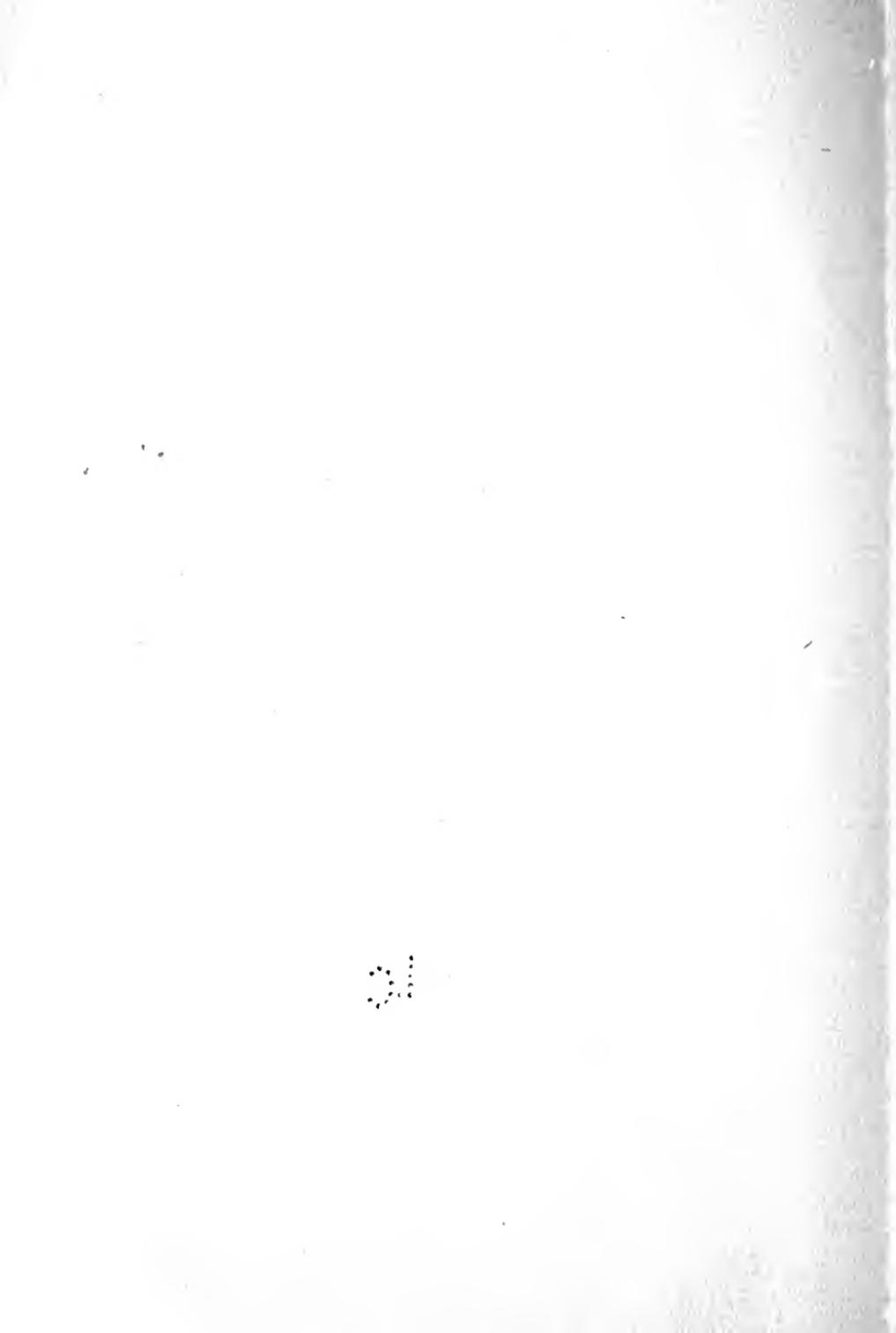
ROBERT BROWNING



New York
THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

1913

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Set up and electrotyped. Published December, 1913.

DEC 24 1913

Norwood Press
J. S. Cushing Co. — Berwick & Smith Co.
Norwood, Mass., U.S.A.

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THE FIRST-BORN OF EGYPT.¹

THAT night came on in Egypt with a step
So calmly stealing in the gorgeous train
Of sunset glories flooding the pale clouds
With liquid gold, until at length the glow
Sank to its shadowy impulse and soft sleep
Bent o'er the world to curtain it from life —
Vitality was hushed beneath her wing —
Pomp sought his couch of purple — care-
worn grief
Flung slumber's mantle o'er him. At that
hour

10 He in whose brain the burning fever fiend
Held revelry — his hot cheek turn'd awhile
Upon the cooler pillow. In his cell
The captive wrapped him in his squalid
rags,
And sank amid his straw. Circean sleep!
Bathed in thine opiate dew false hope
vacates
Her seat in the sick soul, leaving awhile
Her dreamy fond imaginings — pale fear
His wild misgivings, and the warm life-
springs
Flow in their wonted channels — and the
train —

20 The harpy train of care forsakes the heart.
Was it the passing sigh of the night wind
Or some lorn spirit's wail — that moaning
cry
That struck the ear? 'tis hushed — no!
it swells on
On — as the thunder peal when it essays
To wreck the summer sky — that fearful
shriek
Still it increases — 'tis the dolorous plaint,
The death cry of a nation —

It was a fearful thing — that hour of night.
I have seen many climes, but that dread
hour

30 Hath left its burning impress on my soul
Never to be erased. Not the loud crash
When the shuddering forest swings to the
red bolt
Or march of the fell earthquake when it
whelms
A city in its yawning gulf, could quell
That deep voice of despair. Pharaoh arose
Startled from slumber, and in anger sought
The reason of the mighty rushing throng
At that dark hour around the palace gates,
— And then he dashed his golden crown
away

40 And tore his hair in frenzy when he knew
That Egypt's heir was dead — from every
home,
The marbled mansion of regality
To the damp dungeon's walls — gay
pleasure's seat
And poverty's lone hut, that cry was heard
As guided by the Seraph's vengeful arm
The hand of death held on its withering
course,
Blighting the hopes of thousands. —

¹ From the Ms. on the same sheet of paper
as the letter from Sarah Flower and in her
handwriting.

I sought the street to gaze upon the grief
Of congregated Egypt — there the slave
Stood by him late his master, for that hour 50
Made vain the world's distinctions — for
could wealth
Or power arrest the woe? — Some were
there
As sculptured marble from the quarry late
Of whom the foot first in the floating dance,
The glowing cheek hued with the deep'ning
flush,
In the night revel — told the young and
gay.
No kindly moisture dewed their stony eye,
Or damp'd their ghastly glare — for they
felt not:
The chain of torpor bound around the heart
Had stifled it for ever. Tears stole down 60
The furrow'd channels of those withered
cheeks
Whose fount had long been chill'd, but
that night's term
Had loosed the springs — for 'twas a fearful
thing
To see a nation's hope so blasted. One
Press'd his dead child unto his heart — no
spot
Of livid plague was nigh — no purple cloud
Of scathing fever — and he struck his brow
To rouse himself from that wild phantasy
Deeming it but a vision of the night.
I marked one old man with his only son 70
Lifeless within his arms — his withered hand
Wandering o'er the features of his child
Bidding him [wake] from that long dreary
sleep,
And lead his old blind father from the crowd
To the green meadows — but he answer'd
not;
And then the terrible truth flash'd on his
brain,
And when the throng roll'd on some bade
him rise
And cling not so unto the dead one there,
Nor voice nor look made answer — he was
gone.
But one thought chain'd the powers of each 80
mind
Amid that night's felt horror — each one
owned
In silence the dread majesty — the might
Of Israel's God, whose red hand had
avenged
His servants' cause so fearfully —

II

THE DANCE OF DEATH.

"And as they footed it around,
They sang their triumphs o'er mankind!"
de Stael.
Fever.

Bow to me, bow to me;
Follow me in my burning breath,
Which brings as the simoom destruction
and death.

My spirit lives in the hectic glow
When I bid the life streams tainted flow
In the fervid sun's deep brooding beam
When seething vapours in volumes steam,
And they fall — the young, the gay — as
the flower
'Neath the fiery wind's destructive power.
This day I have gotten a noble prize —
There was one who saw the morning rise,
And watch'd fair Cynthia's golden streak
10 Kiss the misty mountain peak.
But I was there, and my pois'rous flood
Envenom'd the gush of the youth's warm
blood.
They hastily bore him to his bed,
But o'er him death his swart pennons
spread:
The skill'd leech's art was vain,
Delirium revelled in each vein.
I mark'd each deathly change in him;
I watch'd his lustrous eye grow dim,
The purple cloud on his deep swol'n brow,
20 The gathering death sweat's chilly flow,
The dull dense film obscure the eye,
Heard the last quick gasp and saw him die.

Pestilence.

My spirit has past on the lightning's wing
O'er city and land with its withering;
In the crowded street, in the flashing hall
My tramp has been heard: they are lonely
all.
A nation has swept at my summons away
As mists before the glare of day.
See how proudly reigns my hand
30 In the black'ning heaps on the surf-beat
strand
[Where]¹ the rank grass grows in deserted
streets
[Where] the terrified stranger no passer
meets
[] around the putrid air
[] lurid and red in Erinnys stare
Where silence reigns, where late swell'd the
lute,
Thrilling lyre, mellifluous flute.
There if my prowess ye would know
Seek ye — and bow to your rival low.

Ague.

Bow to me, bow to me;
My influence is in the freezing deeps
Where the icy power of torpor sleeps,
40 Where the frigid waters flow
My marble chair is more below;
When the Grecian brav'd the Hellespont's
flood
How did I curdle his fever'd blood,
And sent his love in tumescent wave
To meet with her lover an early grave.
When Hellas' victor sought the rush

¹ Papers removed where sealed.

Of the river to lave in its cooling gush,
Did he not feel my iron clutch
When he fainted and sank at my algid
touch?
These are the least of the trophies I 50
claim —
Bow to me then, and own my fame.

Madness.

Hear ye not the gloomy yelling
Or the tide of anguish swelling,
Hear ye the clank of fetter and chain,
Hear ye the wild cry of grief and pain,
Followed by the shuddering laugh
As when fiends the life blood quaff?
See! see that band,
See how their bursting eyeballs gleam,
As the tiger's when crouched in the jungle's 60
lair,
In India's sultry land.
Now they are seized in the rabies fell,
Hark! 'tis a shriek as from fiends of hell;
Now there is a plainling moan,
As the flow of the sullen river —
List! there is a hollow groan.
Doth it not make e'en *you* to shiver?
These are they struck of the barbs of my
quiver.
Slaves before my haughty throne,
Bow then, bow to me alone. 70

Consumption.

'Tis for me, 'tis for me;
Mine the prize of Death must be;
My spirit is o'er the young and gay
Ason snowy wreaths in the bright noonday.
They wear a melting and vermeille flush
E'en while I bid their pulses hush.
Tracing o'er their dying brow
With the passions of health's best roseate
glow
When the lover watches the full dark eye
Robed in tints of ianthine dye, 80
Beaming eloquent as to declare
The passions that deepen the glories there.
The frost in its tide of dazzling whiteness,
As Juno's brow of chrystral brightness,
Such as the Grecian's hand would give
When he bade the sculptured marble
"live,"

The ruby suffusing the Hebe cheek,
The pulses that love and pleasure speak
Can his fond heart claim but another day,
And the loathsome worm on her form shall 90
prey.
She is scathed as the tender flower,
When mildews o'er its chalice lour.
Tell me not of her balmy breath,
Its tide shall be shut in the fold of death;
Tell me not of her honied lip,
The reptile's fangs shall its fragrance sip.
Then will I say triumphantly
Bow to the deadliest — bow to me!



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